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C O N F I D E N T I A L ISTANBUL 001517

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH MINORITY RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Classified By: Consul General David Arnett for Reasons 1.5 (b&d)

[11.](#) (sbu) Summary: During courtesy calls on the Armenian Patriarch, Chief Rabbi, and Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan, Ambassador Edelman promised to maintain close relations with each community and to press the GOT to implement broader protection for religious freedom in Turkey. Each of the community leaders detailed his principal concerns and problems, including a general shared frustration with the state bureaucracy's failure to implement recent legislative changes. End Summary.

Armenian Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan II  
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[12.](#) (c) Mesrob reminded the Ambassador that the 65,000-strong Armenian community is the largest non-Muslim community in Turkey. In addition to supporting one of only four Armenian Orthodox Patriarchs, its 45 churches, 17 schools, and active press give it an important voice in the global Armenian community. Additionally, Mesrob said that he estimates there are about 1 million Turks of "concealed" Armenian descent living as Muslims in Turkey and about 120 of them "convert back" to Orthodoxy each year. Mesrob's principal complaint about the GOT is its failure to recognize the legal personality of the patriarchate (unlike the Greeks, Mesrob is content to send Armenian priests abroad -- to Jerusalem or Armenia -- for training). Mesrob said that, despite press reports, he does not believe his being denied a seat on a plane to Van was the result of any deliberate harassment. Mesrob said that he actively supports Turkey's EU membership and has done what he can to bring Turkey and Armenia together (a task that he said has been complicated by aggressive statements from the Armenian government). Mesrob added that he hopes to visit the Armenian communities in Baghdad and Jerusalem when the security situations there improve.

Chief Rabbi Isak Haleva  
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[13.](#) (sbu) Haleva and the members of the Jewish Lay Council told the Ambassador that the 22,000-strong Jewish community has had "no particular problems or difficulties" with the Turkish government. When occasional issues arise, they prefer to use their "excellent" personal relations with the PM, FM, and even Turkish military to resolve them. Lay Council President Bensiyon Pinto noted that while the Greeks are seeking to reclaim and register over 2000 properties, the Jewish community has only 4 such claims. The community has 17 active synagogues, a school, a museum, and other social facilities. Agreements with two U.S. universities enable them to send students and future rabbis abroad for training. Members of the Council claimed that while they have experienced no direct restrictions on their freedom to worship, occasional problems with the bureaucracy make life difficult. Others added that some of the pro-Islamic press often print anti-Semitic remarks.

Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan Yusuf Cetin  
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[14.](#) (sbu) Cetin told the Ambassador that the Syrian Orthodox community in Turkey had shrunk from 60,000 to 15,000 in the last 30 years, largely due to immigration to Europe, Australia, and the U.S. (where he said there are two Metropolitans ministering to 25,000 Syrian Orthodox). The remaining community is centered in Istanbul and the Southeast, particularly near Mardin. With only one church in Istanbul and restrictive laws preventing them from building others, the local community has been forced to seek agreements with churches of other denominations. With no religious schools, its priests are educated at two monasteries in Istanbul and five in the Southeast (although students also study simultaneously at public schools). Cetin said that he too supports Turkey's EU membership and is pleased with recent legislative reforms, but following up on implementation will be very important. He pointed to recent attacks on the first non-Muslim university rector (a Christian) as an example of how Turkish society needs to change.

[15.](#) (sbu) In all three of these meetings the Ambassador stressed his determination to maintain close relations with

the religious communities, to press the Turkish government to follow up in implementing recent positive reforms and to further broaden its protection of religious freedom. The Ambassador told his interlocutors that he has already raised these issues with the PM and the relevant ministers and is hopeful that progress can be made before or during the May 2004 NATO Summit in Istanbul and the likely visit of President Bush.

ARNETT